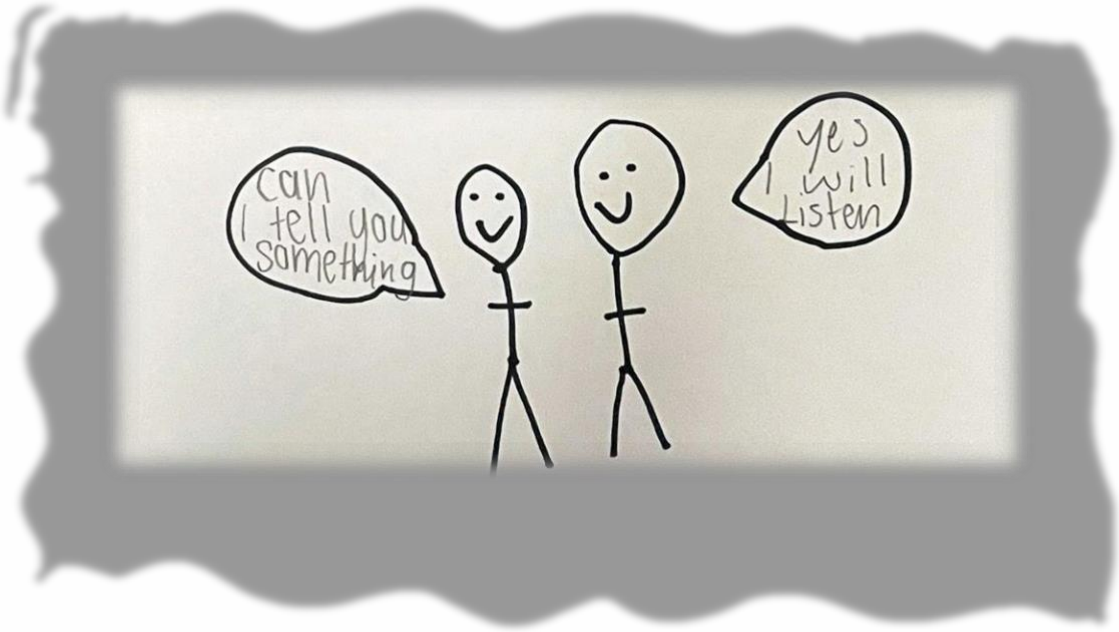
Australian National University

More for Children:
Rights-based Methodology for Research with Children about Poverty



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Suggested citation

Bessell, S. and O'Sullivan, C. 2024. *More for Children: Rights-based Methodology for Research with Children about Poverty.* Canberra: The Children's Policy Centre, The Australian National University. DOI: https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.26676.87680

Cover image drawn by Bananas, aged 11

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Acknowledgements

The research methodology and methods used in the More for Children research have been developed over of years and used in a range of contexts. The More for Children research has further developed our methodology and methods for use with children on the sensitive issue of poverty.

We are grateful to our partners, FamilyCare and Burnie Works, for their support and to the Paul Ramsay Foundation for funding the current phase of More for Children.

Above all, we are grateful to the children, parents and carers who have generously shared their time, experiences, insights, daily challenges and hopes for the future.

Sharon Bessell and Cadhla O'Sullivan

July 2024

Funding: Paul Ramsay Foundation

The research was funded by the Paul Ramsay Foundation (PRF) (grant number 378). Any opinions, findings, or conclusions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of PRF.

PRF would like to thank its partners who were involved in this research for their contributions.

The Children's Policy Centre acknowledges, celebrates, and pays our respects to the Ngunnawal and Ngambri people on whose country we are situated, and to all First Nations Australians on whose traditional lands we work. Much of this research is taking place on the lands of the Yorta Yorta people and in Pataway, Lutruwita/Trouwana on the lands of the Pakana/Palawa people. We recognise that these lands were never ceded. We pay respect to elders past, present and emerging and acknowledge the ongoing care for and connection to country.

In our research, our aim is to engage genuinely and respectfully with the traditional owners of the lands on which we work, recognising the importance of connection to community and country for all children and young people, but especially for First Nations children and young people.

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More for Children: A program of transformative research

More for Children is a program of transformative research that is building our understanding of children's experiences of poverty to bring change and, ultimately, contribute to ending child poverty in Australia.

More for Children supports global efforts to end extreme poverty by 2030 and to significantly reduce multidimensional poverty. Sustainable Development Goal 1 aims to end poverty in all its forms everywhere, and to *reduce by at least half the proportion of men, women, and children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions according to national definitions*, by 2030. Yet many countries do not have agreed definitions of multidimensional poverty. Child poverty is often bundled into all forms of poverty, and child-centred definitions are rare. Our research aims to better understand, assess and respond to child poverty, and will contribute to:

- Child-centred definitions of multidimensional poverty
- Innovative approaches to assessing child poverty
- Child-inclusive polices, services and programs

Undertaking research with children on a topic as sensitive as poverty presents a range of challenges. Narratives about poverty are often characterised by shame and stigma, with individuals blamed for their own situation. In countries as diverse as Norway, Uganda and South Korea, people living in contexts of poverty have described the shame they are made to feel.[1] People experiencing poverty are often blamed for their own circumstances and are treated with disrespect when they seek public services to which they are entitled.[2]

This report focuses on our research in Australia, where narratives of individual blame and shame have been particularly pronounced in recent decades.[3] While there is a growing recognition of the need to shift narratives, refocus attention on addressing underlying causes of poverty, and move to systems approaches, the shame and pain created by negative and deficit narratives have created – and continue to create – deep scars for many people.

Our research demonstrates ways in which poverty results from structural inequality and systems that fail some individuals and groups. Children are never responsible for their own poverty, and our research highlights the ways in which families act to support their children in very difficult situations. Yet, the stigma that has been directed towards people who are experiencing poverty makes the topic a highly sensitive one. Undertaking research with adults about their experiences of poverty requires careful consideration of the ethical issues and the methodologies and methods used. Undertaking research with children about their experiences of poverty requires even deeper consideration. Poorly designed research or research that does not place children's best interests and human rights at the centre runs the risk of exacerbating children's sense of shame – or creating a sense of shame where it had not previously existed.

Despite the challenges, research with children on poverty is necessary and justifiable when undertaken in ways that are rights-based and child-centred. Research with children has the potential to achieve a child-inclusive approach to conceptualising, defining and measuring poverty.[4] In Australia, the extent of child poverty demands that we better understand it in order to respond.

[1] E.Chase and G. Bantebya-Kyomuhendo (eds.). 2015. *Poverty and Shame: Global Experiences*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[2] R. Walker. 2014. *The Shame of Poverty*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[3] S. Bessell and C. O'Sullivan. 2024. *More for Children: Children's Experiences of Poverty*. Children's Policy Centre, The Australian National University. Available at https://childrenspolicycentre.org
[4] S. Bessell, C. Siagian and A. Bexley. 2020. 'Towards child-inclusive concepts of childhood poverty: the contribution and potential of research with children', *Children and Youth Services Review*, 116.

In 2019-2020, one in six children under the age of 15 years lived in income poverty. This figure is based on the OECD definition of 50 percent of median household income. Australia does not have an official measure of poverty.[5] For children living in sole parent families (most often single mother households) the poverty rate in 2019-2020 was 39 percent.[6] In some communities, including a community in which the More for Children research has taken place, 40 percent of children under the age of 15 years live in income poverty.[7] These numbers are shocking, particularly in a country as wealthy as Australia, and point to a deep social problem. Yet, they do not tell us enough about the ways in which poverty impacts on children's lives and the steps that need to be taken urgently to better support children and their families and to end poverty in all its forms.

We do know that increasing incomes has a dramatic and positive effect. COVID-19 and the introduction of the coronavirus supplements acted as a 'natural experiment', demonstrating transformative power of income in reducing poverty. In 2020, coronavirus supplements were introduced to support Australians during COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions. Increases in social security benefits for people of working age reduced both poverty and financial stress, including among sole parent families.[8] In the September quarter of 2019, just prior to the pandemic, child income poverty was 16.2 percent. In the March quarter of 2020, child income poverty had risen to 19 percent, but with the implementation of coronavirus supplements, fell to 13.7 percent.[9] With the removal of the coronavirus supplements, child poverty increased once more.[10]

While we know that there is, by definition, a direct relationship between levels of income poverty and levels of income, we know less about the multidimensional nature of child poverty and less about children's own experiences. That poverty is multidimensional is now well recognised.[11] Yet, clear definitions of multidimensional poverty are lacking. Sustainable Development Goal 1, for example, defers to national definitions of multidimensional poverty, but few countries have such definitions in place.[12] In Australia, there has been limited attention given to the multidimensional nature of poverty generally, and to child poverty specifically. Yet, child poverty is of particular concern, not only because of the number of children affected, but also because of the long-term consequences of childhood deprivation on affected individuals and for society as a whole. Responding to childhood poverty remains a major challenge for Australia, where the levels of child income poverty are inexcusable given levels of national wealth. Poverty impacts on children's ability to engage in education and has serious implications for social mobility.[13] It has been argued that no strategy to reduce poverty or enhance social mobility will be more effective and efficient than to give each child a good start in life.[14] Moreover, as ideas of well-being become more influential in policy at both State/Territory and Commonwealth levels, it is essential to recognise that well-being for all cannot be achieved while current levels of child poverty continue.

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[5] P. Davidson, B. Bradbury, and M. Wong. 2023. *Poverty in Australia 2023: Who is Affected*, *Poverty and Inequality Partnership Report no. 20*. Strawberry Hills: Australian Council of Social Service and UNSW Sydney.

[6] P. Davidson, B. Bradbury, and M. Wong. 2023. *Poverty in Australia 2023: Who is Affected*, *Poverty and Inequality Partnership Report no. 20*. Strawberry Hills: Australian Council of Social Service and UNSW Sydney.

[7] Meg Brodie. 2023. *Mapping poverty in Victoria*, Victorian Council of Social Service. Available at https://vcoss.org.au/cost-of-living/2023/08/povertymaps/

[8] B. Phillips, M. Gray and N. Biddle. 2020. *COVID-19 JobKeeper and JobSeeker impacts on poverty and housing stress under current and alternative economic and policy scenarios*, ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods. Australian National University. Available at https://csrm.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2020/8/Impact_of_Covid19_JobKeeper_and_Jobeeker_measures_on_Poverty_and_Financial_Stress_FINAL.pdf

[9] P. Davidson, B. Bradbury, and M. Wong. 2023. *Poverty in Australia 2023: Who is Affected*, *Poverty and Inequality Partnership Report no. 20*. Strawberry Hills: Australian Council of Social Service and UNSW Sydney.

[10] S. Bessell. 2022. 'The impacts of COVID-19 on children in Australia: deepening poverty and inequality', *Children's Geographies*, 20:4: 448-458.

[11] Y. Chzhen, D. Gordon and S. Handa. 2018. 'Measuring multidimensional child poverty in the era of the sustainable development goals', *Child Indicators Research*. 11.

[12] R. Walker. 2015. '*Multidimensional Poverty'. GSDRC Professional Development Reading Pack no. 22.* Birmingham, UK: University of Birmingham; R. Bray, M. De Laat, X. Godinot, A. Ugarte and R. Walker. 2019. *The Hidden Dimensions of Poverty*, Montreuil, Fourth World Publications.

[13] J. Wyn. 2012. 'The changing context of Australian youth and its implications for social inclusion', *Youth Studies Australia*, 28(1), 46–50; J. Skattebol. 2011. 'The changing context of Australian youth and its implications for social inclusion'. *Youth Studies Australia*, 28(1), 46–50.

[14] S. Bessell. 2022. 'Rethinking child poverty', *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, 23(4); J. Vandermoortele. 2012. 'Equity begins with children' in A. Minujin and S. Nandy, *Global child poverty and well-being: measurement, concepts, policy and action*, Bristol: The Policy Press.

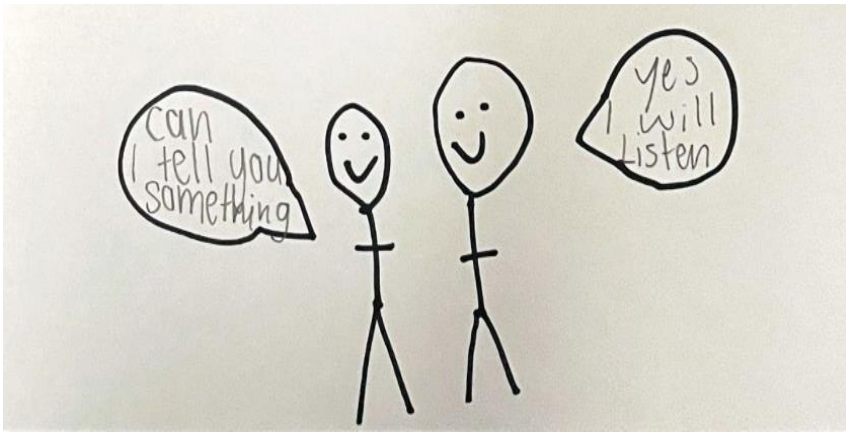
More for Children aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of children's experiences of poverty in Australia, providing a child-centred knowledge base for understanding, assessing, and responding to child poverty. While the research has direct relevance for Australia, it also has important implications for addressing child poverty elsewhere.[15]

More for Children focuses on middle childhood (ages six to 12 years) and also includes young people aged 13 to 16 years.[16] This paper describes the methodology that underpins the research with all age groups, while the methods described are those used with children in middle childhood (six to 12 years). The focus on middle childhood is especially important, given that this is a group that is often neglected in research, policy and services.

Talking with and Listening to Children

More for Children has been designed to ensure children do not feel any sense of shame or stigma. We do not use the words 'poverty', 'disadvantage' or other negative terms with children. Instead, we ask about the things that make life good and the things that make life tough. Children often use words like 'struggling', some referred to poverty or being poor.

Our approach begins with listening to children deeply and with respect. However, while listening is essential to our approach, research with children on sensitive topics such as poverty require carefully designed methodology and methods.



A message from Bananas, aged 11

Importantly, we differentiate between methodology and methods. Methodology encompasses the principles and theoretical perspectives that underpin research, while methods are the tools (or activities) used to gather data. While research methods are experienced directly by children, it is the methodology that determines *how* those methods are experienced. Our research takes a rights-based, child-centred approach. Methodology – the principles, theories and values that shape how we engage with children – is of utmost importance.

[15] See S. Bessell. 2022. 'Rethinking child poverty', *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities,* 23(4).
[16] Early findings of the More for Children research are provided in S. Bessell and C. O'Sullivan. 2024. *More for Children: Children's Experiences of Poverty*, The Children's Policy Centre, The Australian National University. Available at https://childrenspolicycentre.org

The More for Children Methodology

The epistemological approach taken by More for Children aims to co-construct knowledge with children, acknowledging, respecting and valuing their insights and experiences. The methodology used is underpinned by two sets of principles: respect for children's human rights (rights-based research) and child-centred approaches.

Rights-based Research with Children

Rights-based research with children was pioneered by Judith Ennew, and the underlying principles are most clearly articulated in a series of handbooks on the right to be properly researched[17]. In practice, rights-based research demands that several principles be upheld throughout the research:

- Respect for children's dignity and human rights is central. The research must be conducted in a manner that fosters this fundamental principle. All publications from the research must represent children in a manner that accords with this principle.
- Informed consent from parents or primary carers must be sought and voluntarily provided. Parental consent is necessary but not sufficient.
- Informed consent must also be sought from children and provided voluntarily; children must be free to choose not to participate even if their parents or caregivers provide informed consent.
- Consent is not a point in time decision but an ongoing conversation throughout the process of co-constructing knowledge and gaining insights into children's experiences, views and priorities.
- Children must be free to withdraw – permanently or temporarily – from the process of co-constructing knowledge. It is also important that children understand the research process, and that it is not possible to remove the ideas and experiences they have shared from the research once the analysis is completed and material is published.
- All information shared by children is treated confidentially to ensure that children do not experience any ill-effects as a result of participating in the research.
- In all interactions with children, researchers take care to ensure that they are supportive of children. By its nature, this research raises some challenging issues; and it is important that researchers are never judgemental or dismissive of children, and do not respond in negative ways.
- While these principles of respect, dignity, and volunteerism are especially important for the research with children, they apply to all research participants regardless of age.

Many of the principles outlined above shape research that may not be explicitly described as rights-based. The point of distinction for rights-based research with children is that it draws directly on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Children (UNCRC), whereby researchers have a duty to uphold children's human rights. Children are positioned as rights-bearers, who are entitled to be treated in ways that recognise and respect their rights. In taking a rights-based approach, More for Children is informed by the UNCRC, with four articles of particular importance: Articles 12, 13, 3 and 36.[18]

[17] J, Ennew, with T. Abebe, R. Bangyai, P. Karapituck, A. Trine Kjorholt, T. Noonsup, with additional material from H. Beazley, S. Bessell, P. Daengchart-Kushanonglu, R. Waterson. 2009. *The Right to be Properly Researched. How to Do Rights-Based, Scientific Research with Children: A Set of Ten Manuals for Field Researchers*, Bangkok: Black on White Publications and Knowing Children.

[18] H. Beazley, S. Bessell, J. Ennew and R. Waterson. 2009. 'The right to be properly researched: research with children in a messy, real world', *Children's Geographies*, 7 (4).

Articles of the UNCRC underpinning rights-based research with children

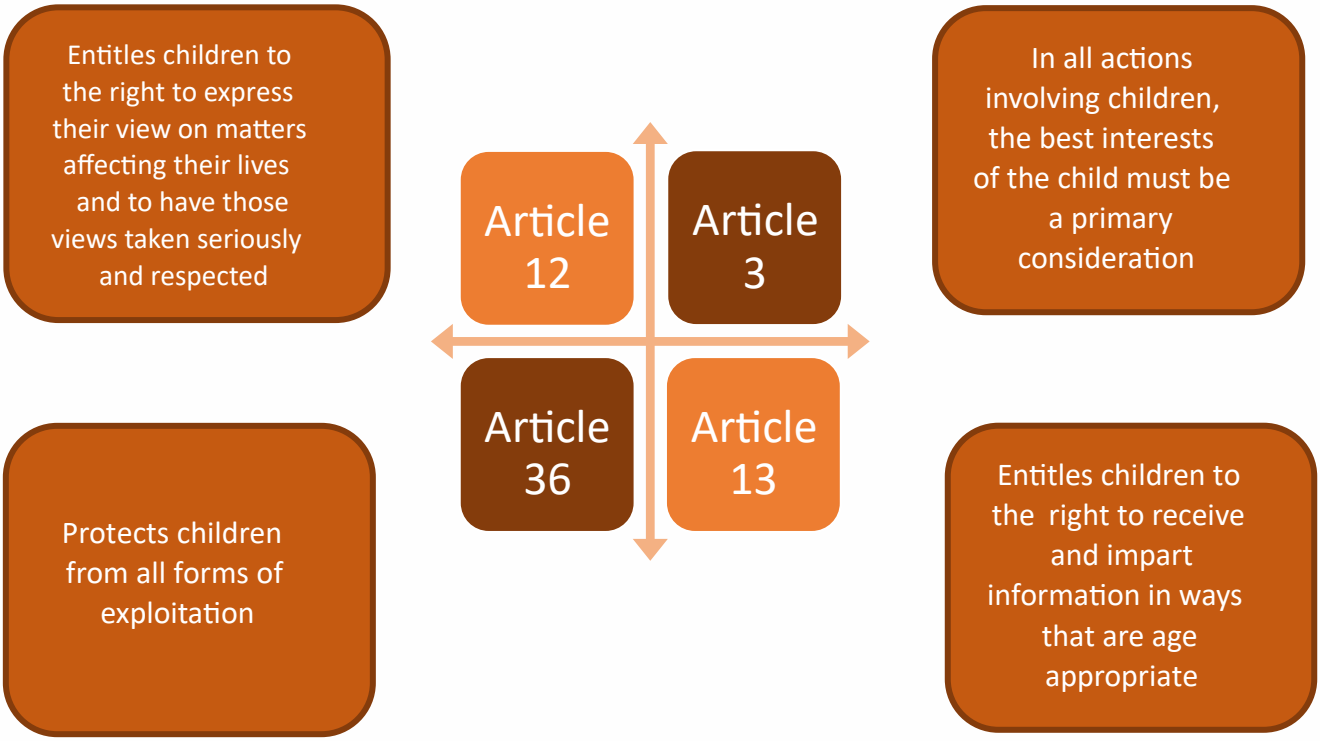


Figure 1: More for Children's rights-based principles underpinning research with children

Article 12 of the UNCRC entitles children to the right to express their views on matters affecting their lives and to have those views taken seriously and respected. This places an obligation on researchers to create a research environment within which children feel sufficiently safe and comfortable to share their views and experiences. Moreover, researchers have a duty to respect and accurately represent children's views. In research of this kind, there is an onus on researchers to bring children's views, experiences and concerns to the attention of adult decision-makers to the greatest extent possible, in order to bring positive change. Applied to a research context, Article 12 of the UNCRC aligns powerfully with the position put forward by David Piachaud[19], that 'the study of poverty is only ultimately justifiable if it influences individual and social attitudes and actions.' The central aim of More for Children is to bring children's voices and experiences, in all their complexity and diversity, to the fore, to change narratives around poverty, and to influence policy and services in ways that benefit children who are growing up in contexts of poverty.

The second article of the UNCRC that is particularly relevant to rights-based research with children is Article 13. Informed by this research, More for Children aims to ensure that children's right to receive and impart information in ways that are age appropriate is respected. This has particular importance for conversations around consent and places a duty on researchers to ensure that children understand the nature of the research and their rights within it. While we use written consent sheets in the More for Children research, they are only one element of the informed consent process and open, age-appropriate conversations with children are essential. These conversations are not confined to the outset of the research but continue throughout. Article 13 also places an obligation

[19] D. Piachaud. 1987. 'Problems in the definition and measurement of poverty', *Journal of Social Policy*, 16(2).

on researchers to ensure that methods (discussed below) are designed to enable children to share information in ways that are age-appropriate and to provide choice and flexibility.

Article 3 of the UNCRC states that in all actions involving children, the best interests of the child must be a primary consideration. Rights-based research is built on the principle that the interests of each child participating must be upheld, and research must not be extractive or prioritise 'gathering data' over engaging respectfully with children. This means creating a research environment whereby children feel safe, and respected and can withdraw as they wish.

Article 36 of the UNCRC protects children from all forms of exploitation. The history of research with (or often, on) children demonstrates the extent to which research can be exploitative.[20] Article 36 guards against extractive approaches that position children as the objects of research and neglects – or violates – their human rights.

Article 3 and Article 36 are closely intertwined within rights-based research with children. Together, these articles are a reminder that ensuring children's best interests requires that adults both acknowledge and move away from age-based hierarchies. This opens the way to developing partnerships with children, whereby adult researchers relinquish their power. At the heart of this shift is a commitment from adults to genuinely listen and respond to children. This includes responding appropriately if children indicate that they do not wish to participate or want to negotiate the terms on which they participate. Here, the principle of informed dissent, as a complement to informed consent, becomes essential – and children must feel comfortable to say 'no' within the research process.[21]

The four articles of the UNCRC outlined above, and the principles underpinning them, are central in ensuring that the More for Children research supports children to share their views and experiences in ways that are respectful and genuinely value their contribution.

In ensuring that children are respected, and their human rights are protected throughout the More for Children research, particular attention is given to the language used. As discussed above, the term 'poverty' is often associated with shame, stigma and individual blame. Rights-based research must balance the right for children to express their views on matters affecting their lives (Article 12 of the UNCRC) and ensuring their self-worth is not devalued. Within the More for Children research, the term 'poverty' is not used by researchers, although children may introduce words such as 'poor' or 'poverty'. Instead, researchers use the language of 'when life is good', 'when life is tough', and 'when people are struggling'. This enables children to discuss issues on their own terms and using words that they are comfortable with. Similarly, the terms 'poor' or 'poverty' are not used when interviewing or talking with parents, although they may introduce those terms. In information provided to children and parents about the research, it is made clear that the research aims to understand what makes life good or tough for children and families in order to contribute to reducing, and ultimately ending, child poverty, and to improve policies and services for children and families, particularly those who are struggling.

The language of poverty is used in the More for Children research when interviewing professionals (government officials and community workers/service providers), and when communicating the findings of the research, because childhood poverty is a pressing issue, and one that should not be less precise or less confronting by the use of 'softer' terms. In reporting and communicating children's insights, views and experiences strengths- and assets-based approaches are used, in line with our rights-based principles.

[20] S. Bessell. 2015. 'Children: research' in H. van Ten (eds.). *Encyclopedia of Global Bioethics*, New York: Springer; M. Woodhead and D. Faulkner. 2008. 'Subjects, objects? Dilemmas of psychological research with children' in P. Christiansen and A. James (eds.) *Research with Children: Perspectives and Practices*, 2nd edition. New York: Routledge.

[21] S. Bessell. 2024. 'Research with children: balancing protection and participation' in B. Smyth, M. Martin and M. Downing (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Research Ethics*, New York: Routledge.

Child-Centred Research

In addition to principles of human rights, principles of child-centredness underpin the More for Children research. Children-centred research is shaped by the following values:

- Children are listened to with care and respect, and researchers consistently engage with children accordingly.
- Informed consent is sought in a way that is age appropriate and is an ongoing conversation with children. Children can exercise informed dissent (or to say 'no').
- Children are not asked direct questions, instead children are invited to take part in activities that act as a catalyst for discussion. Activities are age appropriate and respond sensitively to children's real world lives. For example, children should be able to choose whether to write, draw, talk or communicate by another method, depending on their preference and abilities.
- The research should be a positive, enjoyable and supportive experience for children. The research incorporates a range of fun activities. However, it should also be recognised that discussing difficult subjects is not always fun, but the experience of sharing can be a positive one if children are well supported.

Principles underpinning child-centred research

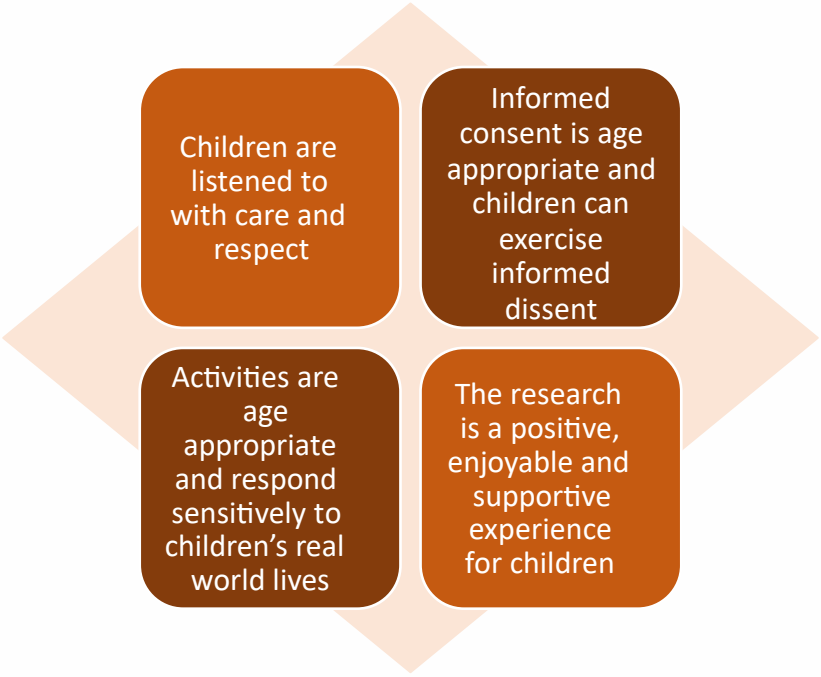


Figure 2: More for Children's child-centred principles underpinning research with children

The principles that underpin the research are put into practice through child-centred research workshops.[22] Child-centred research workshops generally involve 10 to15 children and three to four researchers and are activity based. Children can engage in activities on their own terms; this includes deciding whether they prefer to work individually or as part of a small group – and children often shift back and forth between individual and group activities during the research. Children are also able to decide which researchers they would like to talk with, and children often choose to talk with different researchers at different times or on different issues.

[22] S. Bessell. 2013. Child-centred research workshops: a model for participatory, rights-based engagement with children, *Developing Practice*, 37.

Child-centred research workshops incorporate the strengths of both group-based and individual-based research methods with children, while minimising the negatives of each. Children have the opportunity to share ideas and experiences one-on-one with researchers if they wish but are not placed in a situation that may make them feel awkward or uncomfortable by being 'required' to talk to an adult researcher, as happens through some research methods. Child-centred research workshops also enable children to be part of a group if they feel more comfortable – or to 'hide' within the group, if they prefer not to share their views and experiences. Here, child-centred research workshops give meaning to the principle of informed dissent, or temporarily withdrawing from the research.

The ethical principle of confidentiality is taken very seriously in the More for Children research. This involves ongoing conversations with children as part of the ongoing informed consent process, as noted above. It also means adopting practical and child-centred ways of protecting children's confidentiality. A key strategy is the use of 'research nicknames'. Children choose their own research nickname, or pseudonym, at the start of the research. Research nicknames are then used throughout the research process. The researchers also take on research nicknames, which are often chosen by children. Research nicknames are used in writing up the findings, so long as children's confidentiality can be maintained. Children's real names are not used in any publications or presentations of the research, but children can identify their own ideas because they are attributed to them via the research nicknames.

Research Ethics

Our methodology is guided by the ethical principles set down in the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* and embedded in a deep commitment to ethics in practice. The More for Children research embraces participatory ethics that recognise and respect local strengths, practices and relationships and responds to the strengths and values of local communities.[23] In taking ethics in practice seriously, the best interests of the children participating in the research are paramount.[24]

While ethical guidelines are essential to rights-based and child-centred research there are occasions when procedural ethics create ethical dilemmas. In the More for Children research, ethical dilemmas arose regarding remuneration or compensation for children's time and contribution. Our ethical position is that children should receive recognition of their contribution to the research, and in the More for Children research we proposed providing children with a gift voucher. This approach was supported and approved by the Australian National University Human Research Ethics Committee. However, there are reasonable concerns that offering compensation may place pressure on children to participate in research. This is especially the case when research is conducted in institutions that are hierarchical and where children may not be used to exercising choice. While most of the research with children in More for Children was undertaken in community settings, research also took place in a small number of schools, requiring approval from the relevant education departments. In one jurisdiction, we were not permitted to provide gift vouchers to individual children but were able to provide each participating child and the school as a whole with a gift. In a second jurisdiction, we were not permitted to provide any compensation, gift or token of appreciation to participating children.

This does raise questions about the extent to which a rights-based and child-centred methodology can be fully practiced when procedural ethics position children as necessarily vulnerable to persuasion and are rigidly applied. Procedural ethics are essential to ensure children are protected and respected within research, but in some instances – as outlined here – they can come into tension with child-centred interpretations of children's human rights. We sought to convey to children the depth of our appreciation and the extent of their contribution, but we felt uneasy that we were unable to demonstrate that appreciation in a material way.

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[23] T. Abebe and S. Bessell. 2014. 'Advancing ethical research with children: critical reflections on ethical guidelines', *Children's Geographies,* 12(1).

[24] C. O'Sullivan. 2022. '"Your life looks like a fairytale": challenges in building rapport with children and youth in contexts of protracted conflict', Ethical Research Involving Children. Available at https://childethics.com/case-studies/your-life-lookslike-a-fairytale-challenges-in-building-rapport-with-children-and-youth-in-contexts-of-protracted-conflict-by-cadhlaosullivan/

As the example of compensation or remuneration indicates, research of any kind – and with children in particular – requires both a commitment to fundamental principles and a degree of flexibility and sometimes compromise in how they are applied. Yet compromise should never result in a violation of children's human rights.

Cultural Sensitivity

The More for Children methodology is designed to ensure that all children feel safe and are respected and valued within the research process. Our methodology also aims to break down age-based power hierarchies so that children can participate on their own terms. We are also acutely aware of the importance of ensuring children's cultural safety during the research.

The More for Children research did not seek to engage specifically with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children, but we were aware that Indigenous children might participate in the research – and approximately 10 percent of the children who participated are Indigenous. While the research methodology and methods were designed by non-Indigenous researchers, we were conscious from the outset of ensuring the cultural safety of any Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children who participated.

The development of the research methodology and methods were guided not only by the *Australian National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research*, but also by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) *Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research;* NH&MRC *Ethical Conduct in Research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and Communities: Guidelines for Researchers and Stakeholders 2018 (NH&MRC Guidelines);* and NH&MRC *Keeping on Track II: a Companion Document to Ethical Conduct in Research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples* and *Communities: Guidelines for Researchers and Stakeholders (Keeping on Track).* We recognise that while *Keeping on Track* is intended for use primarily by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research participants and communities, it is a valuable guide for all research undertaken in Australia.

In addition to adhering to guidelines, prior to commencing research with children, we workshopped our proposed approach and took advice from Indigenous organisations in the communities in which the research took place. The participation of an Indigenous researcher in several child-centred research workshops was important in ensuring children's cultural safety and checking that both methodology and methods were used in a way that was inclusive and supportive of any Indigenous children participating. In carefully considering the cultural safety of any Indigenous children who might participate in the research, the safety and engagement of all participating children were strengthened and scaffolded.

Approximately ten percent of the children who participated in the research are from diverse cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds, and were seeking asylum in Australia at the time of the research or had arrived in Australia as refugees. To ensure the cultural safety of these children, we workshopped the research methodology and methods with members of the communities from which the children came. In addition, members of the community were present during the research to provide support for children if needed and to act as interpreters between any parents who did not speak English and the researchers.

A rights-based and child-centred approach to research rejects mechanically applying a technique or method, but instead requires a process of dialogue, whereby children are seen as partners with the power to determine if, when and how they wish to participate.

More for Children Research Methods

The methodology that shapes the More for Children research is designed to ensure that children are treated with dignity and their views are respected.[25] The methods or activities used are designed to let children share their views and experiences on their own terms, and to choose not to participate at any time.

Children experience the research methodology – or the principles and values on which the research is based – through their interactions with researchers. Research methods are experienced directly, through the activities in which children engage. As such, careful design (testing and redesign) of methods is essential.

The methods used in the More for Children research are designed to ensure that children:

- find the research a positive experience.
- are safe and supported.
- can participate in ways that make them feel comfortable.
- can withdraw from the research should they wish to do so.
- know that their views are respected and valued.

In addition, the methods are designed to ensure the findings are robust and meet requirements for research quality and integrity.

More for Children uses a 'toolkit' approach to methods (or research activities). A series of methods are developed, and children can choose to participate in all or some. Children also have the option to make amendments to the methods if they wish. Methods are activity based and designed to enable children to engage on their own terms. While some methods are based on drawings, researchers do not aim to 'interpret' drawings independent of children themselves, instead all activities are used as a catalyst for conversations.

A range of methods have been used in the More for Children research; of these, four are key methods.

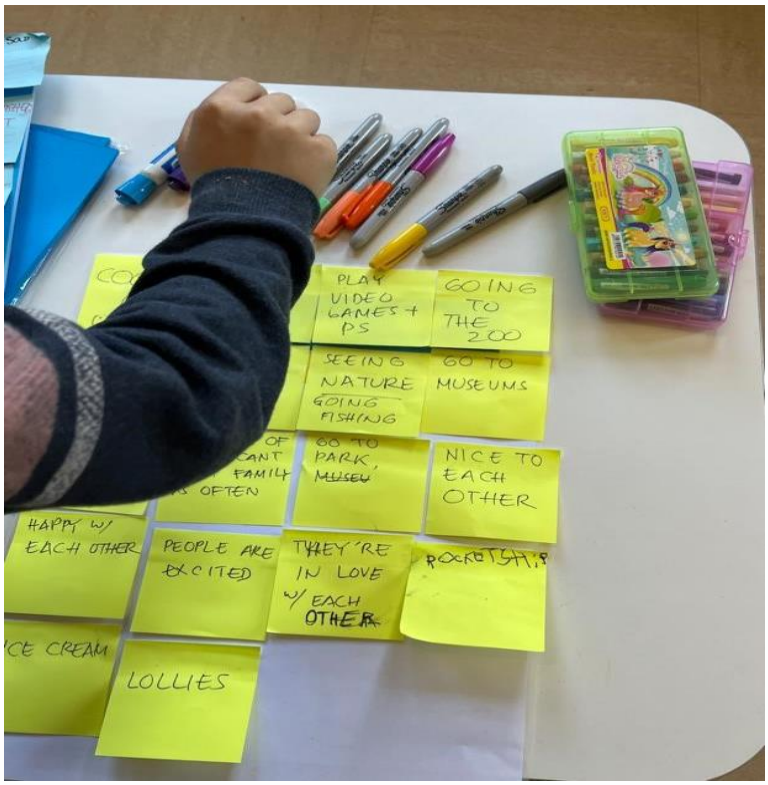
Method 1: When Life is Good, When Life is Tough

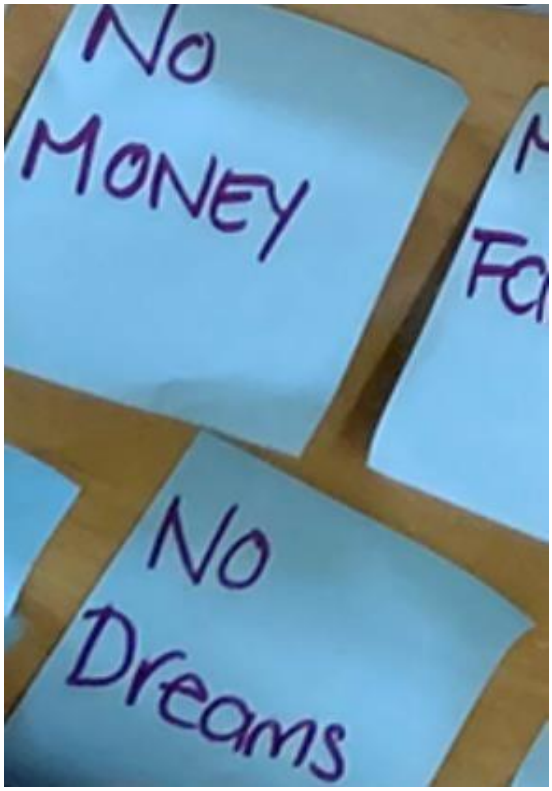
In this method, children are invited to identify the things that make life good for children – those things are then the topic of conversation. Children are then asked to identify the things that make life tough for children – and again, a conversation follows. Children are reminded that they do not have to share personal experiences if they do not wish to but are invited to talk generally about what makes life good or tough for children.

This is a foundational method, designed to provide deep insight into children's experiences of living in contexts of poverty, to understand how children identify the multiple dimensions of poverty, and to co-construct with children conceptualisations and definitions of multidimensional poverty.

[25] S. Bessell. 2015. 'Rights-based research with children: principles and practice' in R. Evans, L. Holt and T. Skelton (eds.) *Methodological Approaches, Geographies of Children and Young People*, vol 2, Singapore: Springer.

Method 1: When Life is Good, When Life is Tough





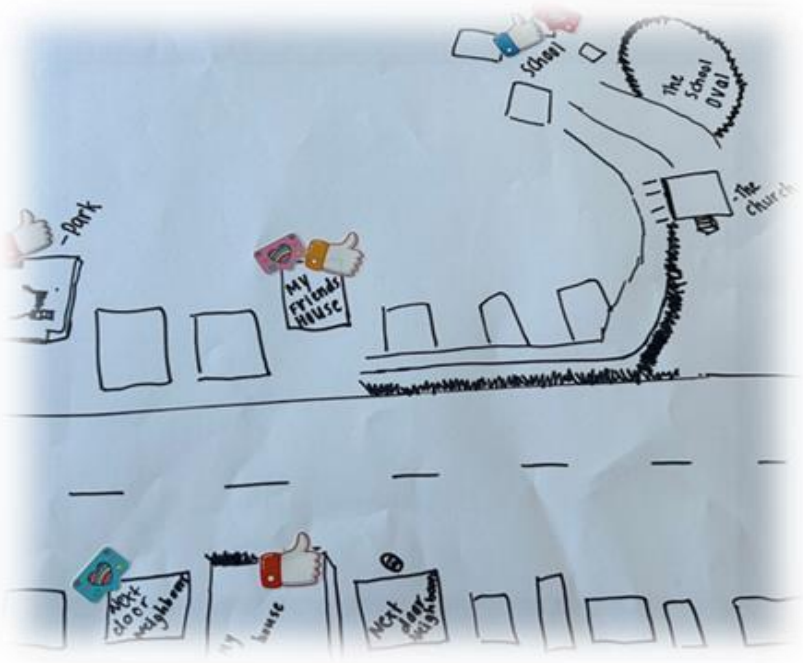
Method 2: Community Mapping

In this method, children are invited to draw a map of their community. They are invited to include on the map the following:

- Places they like to go
- Places they do not like to go
- Places that feel unsafe
- Places they wish to go to but do/can not
- People who are supportive and kind
- People they do not like
- People who make them feel uncomfortable or unsafe

The maps are then used as catalysts for discussion.

This method is valuable in supporting children to identify and describe both the material and non-material dimensions of poverty, including patterns of social exclusion and the nature of relationships.



Method 2: Community Maps

Method 3: Role Play – Lets Fix it for Kids

In this method, researchers draw on the issues discussed in method one, focusing on when life is tough. Researchers remind children of the things they said make life tough, and children are invited to add anything that is missing. Those children who want to take part in the role play are then invited to dress up as adult decision makers (if they wish to) and play the part of an adult who makes decisions about things that matter to children. The children who wish to take part in the role play then move to a 'board table' and discuss how to make things better for children, including recommendations for change.

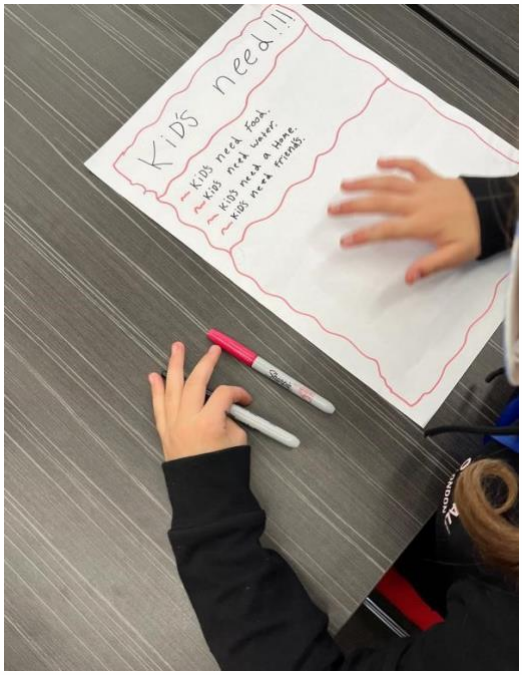
Method 1: When Life is Good, When Life is Tough, being used for Method 3: Role Play

To make the activity fun and engaging, children designed their own masks to wear during the role plays.

Masks designed by children

Method 4: Poster Making

In this method children are invited to write or draw a poster with a message to adult decision makers about what needs to change to ensure that life is good for all children. Children can choose who they wish to target their poster towards – or may choose to develop a broad public or community message.



Method 4: Poster Making

These methods are highly effective in providing deep insights into children's experiences of poverty. What is essential in ensuring the methods are rights-based and child-centred is the attitudes, values and principles researchers bring to the research. Those attitudes, values and principles must be embedded in the research methodology.

Recording Children's Views and Experiences

Research with children that is both ethical and robust requires that children's stories, views and experiences are carefully documented. In our approach, we audio record conversations with children and transcribe the recordings. Children's research nicknames are used – to the greatest extent possible – throughout the child-centred research workshops and are used exclusively in the transcriptions. Children can turn audio recorders off when they choose or ask researchers for a 'private chat' that is not recorded. Photos, such as those used in this report, that do not identify children are sometimes taken (with consent) to illustrate the methods used. Photographs, video recordings and audio recordings, when used, are only for the purposes of documenting children's views and experience and are never made public. Indeed, within the More for Children methodology maintaining children's confidentiality is a principle and practice that is central to our rights-based approach.

Anticipating Possible Ethical Dilemmas

More for Children's rights-based, child-centred methodology places research ethics at the centre and requires that careful consideration be given to how to manage any ethical dilemmas that arise.

A mapping of possible ethical dilemmas is undertaken prior to the research and is further developed as the research unfolds. Anticipating possible ethical dilemmas cannot be comprehensive because the unexpected often happens during rights-based research that ensures children are able to take control over the direction of conversations. However, mapping possible ethical dilemmas helps researchers to think deeply about possible challenges and to respond if (and when) dilemmas arise.

The following section maps out some of the ethical dilemmas that were anticipated – or encountered – during the More for Children research and provides possible responses. In doing so, we note that there is rarely a single way of responding to ethical dilemmas, rather all responses should be guided by the principles that underpin the research.

Ethical Dilemma 1: A child becomes distressed during the research

Anticipate and reduce risk by:

- Framing activities and conversations in a way that enables children have control over the process and ensures they are supported in sharing their experiences and ideas.
- Avoiding asking direct questions, particularly those that may be confronting. Questions should only be asked in the context of conversations, so that children can avoid answering or answer in the manner of their choosing.
- Having alternative activities prepared to redirect the discussion and refocus a child should he/she become distressed.
- Recognising that it is not abnormal for a person, regardless of age, to become upset when discussing some issues (for example, what life is like when people are struggling, or things are tough) and that discussing these issues in a supportive environment can be a positive experience.
- Not using language of poverty or disadvantage, or other potentially stigmatising terms, to reduce the likelihood of children experiencing negative reactions.
- Stopping the research, reassuring children, and shifting to other activities or conversations if needed.
- Establishing partnerships with organisations that can offer support to children if needed.

Ethical Dilemma 2: Children become distressed with a particular method

Anticipate and reduce risk by:

- Carefully designing methods to avoid distress, and to build in alternatives.
- Taking careful note of children's responses to a method to pre-empt any distress by offering an alternative activity.
- Ensuring one researcher is available to intervene, talk privately with a child, and provide support if needed.

Ethical Dilemma 3: A child discloses dangerous, distressing or abusive situations in their family or community (past or present)

Anticipate and reduce risk by:

- Being prepared to gently break the participants into separate activities to reduce the impact of distressing disclosures on other children.
- Listening, staying calm, and being supportive.
- Having a support person available if counselling or support that researchers cannot provide is needed, this should be through a partner organisation.
- Telling the child that you will talk privately with a support person about how to provide support to them, and asking how they feel about that.
- Being clear about what the child has disclosed, but not challenging or undermining the child.
- Asking gently if the child feels unsafe now.
- Informing the research team leader as soon as possible (and immediately after the research session, if it is not possible during the session). If the child said he/she feels unsafe now or if there are immediate concerns for the child's safety, informing the research team leader immediately (during the research – not at the end of the session).
- Carefully document what the child has said, but not questioning a child on any child protection related issues.
- With the research team leader, raise the issue with the designated representative from the relevant partner organisation.

*Our partner organisations have child protection and disclosure strategies, and these strategies underpin our approach. Should a child need immediate support, our partner organisations have capacity to provide such support.

Note: If there is an allegation against the research team leader, the steps above should be followed, but rather than talking with the team leader, the designated representative from the relevant partner organisation should be contacted immediately.

If a child discloses abuse, key principles to follow are:

Do	**Do not**
Make sure you are clear about what the child has told you	Do not challenge or undermine the child
Reassure the child that what has occurred is not their fault	Do not seek detailed information, ask leading questions, or offer an opinion
Explain that other people need to be told in order to stop what is happening; discuss who the child feels comfortable with	Do not discuss the details with any person other than those detailed in these procedures
Promptly and accurately record the discussion in writing	Do not contact the alleged offender

Ethical Dilemma 4: Adults do not wish to respect children's privacy during the research

Anticipate and reduce risk by:

- Inviting parents/carers to remain at the research site if they wish but asking them to remain on the edge of the research and not to intervene unless their child requests they do. If a child requests their parent(s)/carer(s) engage in the research, gently remind the parent/carer to respect the privacy and autonomy of other children.
- Discussing with relevant adults the nature of the research to reduce any queries or concerns they may have, remembering that they may have questions beyond the information sheet and should be encouraged to ask them.
- Discussing with relevant adults the reasons for respecting children's privacy during the research activities.
- Understanding and respecting that adults – particularly parents/primary caregivers – are likely to want to understand the research and have a right to do so.
- Understanding and respecting existing relationships between children and close adults, recognising that on some occasions children may want to have their parents or carers close by.
- Providing refreshments for parents/carers and a place for them to wait in comfort close by the research.

Ethical Dilemma 5: Children wish to withdraw (temporarily or permanently) during the research

Anticipate and reduce risk by:

- Providing alternative, non-research activities (books, games – children's own phones) that children can engage in if they wish to have a break from the research (or to end their participation).
- Reassuring children periodically (and at the beginning of any new method) that they can choose to stop should they wish.

Ethical Dilemma 6: Children become bored or tired with a method

Anticipate and reduce risk by:

- Carefully designing methods to avoid this.
- Taking careful note of children's responses to a method.
- Having alternative methods available.
- Providing alternative activities as needed.
- Recognising that children's best interests and right to be protected from exploitation take precedence over 'data collection'.
- Ensuring there are regular breaks, including for food and drinks.

Ethical Dilemma 7: Some children (i.e., children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, children from a stigmatised group, or children with a disability) are unable to fully participate.

Anticipate and reduce risk by:

- Establishing in advance the background and needs of children to the greatest extent possible.
- Ensuring all group activities with children are carefully composed and do not include children from very different backgrounds, as doing so may introduce power hierarchies or patterns of exclusion. Depending on the situation, a separate session might be beneficial for children with very different backgrounds.
- Carefully designing methods to be inclusive and responsive to the specific needs of individual children.
- Ensuring one researcher is available to step in and support a child/children if required (which should be done without drawing attention to any problem, but by simply engaging with that child/ren).
- Adapting methods to meet the specific needs of individual children if necessary.
- Introducing from the outset of the research, opportunities for children to speak privately with the researcher that they prefer. This space of private chat should be normalised, so it doesn't carry any negative connotation.

Ethical Dilemma 8: Children with particular or additional needs are not able to fully participate

Anticipate and reduce risk by:

- Including the following question on parent/carer consent forms:

  Is there anything about your child that we need to know to ensure they have the best experience of the research? (for example, health condition, disability, etc). This information is only used to help us ensure your child can participate in and enjoy the research. This information is not used as part of the research and is not stored.

- Asking on the parent/caregiver consent form if children have any form of allergy (including food allergies).
- Designing methods that can be easily adapted to respond to children's needs and preferences.
- Applying methods flexibly to enable children to take breaks as needed.
- Supporting and reassuring children who wish to or need to take a break.
- Building in regular breaks for food and rest.

Ethical Dilemma 9: Some children do not want to get off their phones/devices. This is a methodological dilemma more than an ethical dilemma.

Anticipate and reduce risk by:

- Setting some agreed rules at the beginning of the research.
- Providing 'phone time' or 'device time' to periodically check phones, if necessary.
- Encouraging children to engage in the activities for short, focused periods of time.
- Designing activities to be engaging.
- Not setting up the situation as *either* research engagement *or* phone time.

Ethical Dilemma 10: Some children want to photograph or video others on their phones, which could undermine confidentiality and privacy

Anticipate and reduce risk by:

- Explaining concepts of privacy and confidentiality in research at the outset.
- Setting some agreed rules at the beginning of the research.
- Agreeing that any photos/videos must have the consent of the person being photographed.
- Agreeing times for photos to be taken, if consent is provided by other children.
- Ensuring that any photographs do not identify children as taking part in the research to protect confidentiality.

Ethical Dilemma 11: A prospective participant or parent/caregiver of a participant is concerned that the research may create or perpetuate sigma by referring to poverty

Anticipate and reduce risk by:

- Listening to concerns and engage in discussion of the research.
- Explaining that words such as 'poverty', 'poor', and 'disadvantage' are not used by the researchers in conversations with children. Rather, the discussion and activities are focused on what is a good life and what life is like when things are tough.
- Explaining that the reference to poverty on the information sheet is about using this research to communicate to governments how a range of policies and services (including those focusing on poverty) can be more child-sensitive.
- Explaining that the research takes a strengths-based approach and includes a focus on the things that make life good.

Ethical Dilemma 12: A prospective participant or participant is concerned that their community has been chosen because it is 'poor' – perpetuating stigma and stereotypes

Anticipate and reduce risk by being prepared to openly discuss the issues, guided by the following principles:

- Respecting this concern and being prepared to talk it though.
- Listing to how people would like their communities to be described.
- Explaining we will be doing this research in different communities, with the aim improving policies and services.
- Offering to, and providing, reports and outputs from the research.
- Establishing a local advisory group to ensure that community perspectives are heard, taken seriously, and responded to in respectful ways that are shaped by local priorities and knowledge.
- Taking advice from the local advisory group on how the community is described in the research.

Concluding Comments

The More for Children research places children at the centre, respects their dignity and upholds their human rights in both the process of undertaking research with children and co-constructing knowledge and its aim of understanding deeply how poverty shapes children's lives. It also respects children's parents and/or carers and their communities.

The research recognises the distinction between methodology and method. Our methodology is shaped by a deep commitment to children's human rights, to rights-based research, and a child-centred approach. Our ethical approach respects both procedural ethics and places adherence to ethical guidelines at the forefront, while respecting ethics in practice and recognising the need to work responsively with communities. Our rights-based, child-centred methodology is buttressed by the anticipation of possible ethical dilemmas and the adoption of strategies to mitigate and manage risks, then ensuring children are fully supported. Our methodology is put into practice through child-centred research workshops.

Our methods are chosen in line with our methodology, and our deep commitment to working respectfully with children in ways that are engaging, supportive and enjoyable – and allow them to participate in the research on their own terms.

Poverty has too often been associated with shame and stigma, resulting in people who have experienced poverty being unable to talk of its impacts on their lives. This has often resulted in responses to poverty that fail to shift damaging narratives, recognise and respond to the drivers of poverty, or bring about transformative change. Through our rights-based, child-centred methodology children's voices are brought to the fore and their experiences made visible. The pain that children experience because of poverty is illuminated, as are the parts of life that bring children happiness and security. The challenges of undertaking research with children on a topic as sensitive as poverty should not be underestimated, but robust, ethical research with children about poverty is possible if both methodology and methods are carefully designed and children and the protection of their human rights and best interests are at the forefront.